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ABSTRACT

A study examined Japanese-American intercultural communication at the beginning stage from the perspective of Japanese participants. Data were collected in interviews with 50 Japanese visiting students to a large southwestern university for their account of their short-term (5-week) experience in America, which consisted of incidents, events, and observations that were relevant to their communication with United States Americans. Subjects were 34 females and 16 males with an average age of 20, most with 6 or more years of English. Semi-structured one-on-one 30-90 minute interviews were conducted in Japanese by 4 graduate assistants from Japan. Results indicated that seven categories emerged as important variables for this kind of intercultural interaction: preparedness, expectation/anxiety, personality, surprise, difficulties/enjoyment, communication, and "Japaneseness." Findings suggest directions for a grounded Japanese/American intercultural communication theory developed on the basis of evidence from the preliminary data. Possible shapes and forms of the theory await exploration and conceptualization. (Author/CR)

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Our Communication with North Americans: A Study of Intercultural Experience of Japanese Visiting Students*

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Our Communication with North Americans: A Study of Intercultural Experience of Japanese Visiting Students

ABSTRACT

Data were collected in interviews with Japanese visiting students for their account of their short-term experience in the US, which consisted of incidents, events and observations that were relevant to their communication with US Americans. Seven categories emerged as important variables for this kind of intercultural interaction, which were labeled preparedness, expectation/anxiety, personality, surprise, difficulties/enjoyment, communication, and Japaneseness. The paper discusses the categories, their possible relationship in interaction, and the direction for a grounded Japanese-American intercultural communication theory developed on the base of evidence from the data.

Our Communication with Americans: A Study of Intercultural Experience of Japanese Visiting Students

This study aims at a systematic analysis of Japanese-American intercultural communication at the beginning stage from the perspective of Japanese participants. For this purpose, qualitative data are collected through in-depth interviews with participants of such communicative events. General research questions are how Japanese participants perceive their experience in general and particularly in relation to interaction with host-culture members, and what they see as influential factors in their experience of this intercultural encounter.

The study is conducted within the methodological framework described in the grounded theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967) , with the assumption that conceptual development is better when it is built on a solid understanding of variables inductively and directly generated from a vast array of qualitative data. Important elements are thus discovered in and supported by verifiable empirical evidence, which can be used in construction of a theory for further exploration and verification. A theory developed through this process may be especially beneficial as a guide for practical application.

Method

Informants

Informants were 50 Japanese visiting students to a large Southwestern university in the US. These were freshmen to juniors from a college in Japan staying for a short-term visit (5 weeks). There were 34 females and 16 males, with an average age of 20. Most had six or more years of English as a subject at school, with little to none experience in intercultural interaction with U.S. Americans.

Procedure

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted in Japanese by four graduate assistants from Japan. The interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes.

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Based on a set of questions, informants were asked to describe their experience, feelings and personal observations during their short visit in the states, such as what surprise/impress them and what don't, how they feel about the particular event, and what work and what don't for them in their communication with North Americans. They were encouraged to tell their own stories the more the better, and to elaborate and illustrate as much as possible, whereas interviewers also probed for details on a case by case basis, whenever it was needed. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, and then translated into English by six bilingual Japanese assistants, three of whom were also interviewers. Translation was first done first collectively on two sets of two interviews to achieve consistency. The remaining data were divided among the six to be translated independently, before two more experienced translators of the group conducted a final check over the whole set of data for general accuracy and consistency. Total data consisted of about 500 pages of transcripts in English.

Data Analysis

Methods described in Glaser & Strauss (1967) were used as a major tool for primary data analysis with respect to unitization and category discovery, while other interpretive principles discussed in Leiter (1980) and Geertz (1967) also served to provide additional guidance in interpretation of data. The translated transcripts were examined for observation/event as the unit of analysis. The criterion for unitization was that units were mutually exclusive on the base of complete act/event/observation related by informants. Taken into considerations were whether the principle participants were the same, whether the time and place were the same and whether activities were the same. Difference in one of these marked the boundary of an unit. All together close to a thousand units were identified.

The units were then compared for commonality to allow themes to emerge.

This was done by dividing the transcripts into four sets of equal number. One set was examined for common themes, which were used as a categorical base for the second set, to determine the fit between the themes and the data. Additional themes not covered in the first round were also identified in the second round. The additional categories were then used in a reexamination of the first set of data for identification of cases that might be described by the new categories. Mapping of units with categories did not require mutual exclusion, thus an incident/observation might be described by more than one category.

This process was repeated for the third, and the fourth data set until all data were examined on the basis of all themes that emerged. One of the authors and another coder, both of whom were involved in previous stages of the study, each examined about half of the data. Another author then examined all data to verify the fit between the data and the themes.

Results

All together 11 categories were identified and were collapsed into a final set of seven, as several of which were subcategories reflecting different aspects. In combination, these categories exhausted all incidents with a complete description of the intercultural experience described by informants for their five-week visit in the states. The seven categories are labeled as preparedness (motivation, trainings), expectation/anxiety, personality, surprise (novel, negative, positive--shock), difficulties/enjoyment, communication (successful interactions, problems, strategies), and Japaneseness. The category of Japanese is one cutting across all other categories that specified the cultural characteristics of behaving as a Japanese. Each of the seven is described in the following.

Preparedness (motivation, trainings)

This category covers observations and events about psychological

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motivation and practical preparation the informants had done before coming to the states. Most indicated that they were motivated to prepare for it psychologically, and tried to find out as much as possible about the visit, by doing whatever they could to get ready, and by talking to friends or other students who had been to the states in general and those who had been on the previous or similar program specifically. The latter had given them very specific advice on many aspect of the life in the states and what they could do to prepare for it, e.g., try to take TOEFL, don't drink too much in a bar (for females), make appointments when go in to see someone, try to speak English as much as possible. Practically, many told of the things they had done to prepare for this visit, including listening to English conversation tapes, reading books, learning English riddles, taking English conversation class, and attending orientation programs.

Expectation/Anxiety

This category includes observations and events about informants' general expectations as well as anxiety felt in their intercultural experience in the states. Anxiety is reported more frequently than expectations.

Regarding expectation, most often informants expressed either an effort to imagine but could not know what to expect, or expecting difficulties and cultural shock. Interestingly, no one reported expecting excitement or positive anticipation, although it seemed that they were excited and enjoyed the experience. A few, however, indirectly revealed expectations of being welcome and treated with hospitality, as seen in their pressed surprise of indifference of some host members that some were not as friendly as expected.

Anxiety reported varies as to the specific source of this feeling. In general, three major sources can be specified: particular problematic situation (e.g., could not make self understood in English; could not understand others), general negative anticipation of negative outcome (e.g., getting scared of speaking in English; not wanting to talk anymore because

of communication problems), and problematic ingroup situation (e.g., pressure to speak Japanese with ingroups).

Personality

This category includes statements or comments about participants' personal characteristics relevant to intercultural interaction, positive ones and negative ones. Majority of cases referred to those exhibited in the Japanese. More attention seemed to be given to positive features that might facilitate intercultural interaction. Among these are curiosity, willingness to try new things, maturity, independence, maturity, having guts, easy-going, and so on. The negative personality tendencies are the ones that hinder intercultural interaction. Three are mentioned: reservedness, inferiority complex due to poor English proficiency, being depressed easily.

Quite a number of personal characteristics also referred to those found in their American counterparts. Positive ones only were mentioned, which include willingness to work with people, being considerate, open-mindedness, a sense of humor, and cheerfulness.

Enjoyment/Discomfort

This category covers cases when informants mentioned general discomforts and exprerience they enjoyed in the US, apart from matters directly focusing on communication process. More cases of enjoyment were given than that of discomfort. Experience informants reported they enjoyed include teaching American hosts things about Japanese culture, making friends with Americans, various activities with host families/friends (birthday parties, dancing parity, playing with kids), learning about American culture, horse rides and hayrides, talking about opposite sex with American friends, conversation with host friends about common interests, doing sports and communication with other nonnative speakers. Those that brought discomfort include stereotypes about Japanese, selfishness of some host friends, casual manners (e.g., using a bath room with the door open, running around in the house barefooted,

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conversation about church), some forms of having fun (being asked to say vulgar words, asked to do strange dance).

Surprise (novel, negative, positive)

This is one of the two categories with the largest number of incidents. Overall, surprise refers to any observation, occurrence or event that informants found unexpected thus were surprised to see them happening. Sources of surprise can generally be classified into ten groups: closeness to the nature (e.g., squirrels everywhere, buffaloes, mountains, spaciousness of the environment, etc.), eating habits (e.g., different food, light meals, frequent snacks, etc.), nonverbal communicative behaviors (e.g., opposite-sex partners holding hands in public, sitting on the other's laps, kissing in public, etc.), social customs (visitors at midnight, colorful decoration of everything, frequent calls at night, crazy parties, informality, etc.), gender role (e.g., males also cook, father play with children, males shopping, etc.), cultural values (e.g., individuality, aggressiveness, future-orientation, self-confidence, etc.), human relationship (no sense of hierarchy, simpler human relationship, intimacy between couples, etc.), social issues (importance of racial issues, attention to the disabled, etc.), sorority (structure and organization, members closeness, seriousness about marriage), hosts' knowledge about Japan and Asia (e.g., love Japanese cars, ignorant about Japanese/Asian culture). For example, an informant (#17) has this comment.

> "They knew little. They can't even distinguish among China, Japan, and Korea. I was shocked when I was greeted in CHINESE. I said it was Chinese and taught them some Japanese. ... It seems that Americans are interested only in their only country. Some of them are curious about Japan, but most of them don't know a bit about it. Some asked me why I came here, and I said 'to learn English.' It seemed they my response puzzled them. I guess they think English is a language which is spoken in

every country."

Each case of surprise falls into one of three evaluative aspects based on informants comments: novel (neutral) which include the most cases (e.g., nonverbal communication in public), positive (e.g., gender roles, availability of Nature), and negative (e.g., aggressiveness, self-centeredness, indifference to others than their own country).

Two additional subcategory are created. One includes surprises reported to be of such intensity that was literally shocking to them. Examples are a roommate playing with his girlfriend in bed with several others present; opposite-sex persons exhibiting "intimate" behaviors--such as intense hugs and kisses, sitting on the laps--and claimed to be 'just a friend,' indifference of some house-mate who practically ignored them, people using bathrooms with the door open/without doors.

Another includes generalizations of American people in general in contrast to Japanese. Examples are that Americans are more carefree, cheerful and do not worry too much; they more like to talk and never hesitate to complain; they are more relaxed and less tense; they are not as gentle but more straightforward and direct; they follow rules (e.g., observe traffic rules even when nobody else was around) or or break rules (e.g., do not keep promise, or say meaningless things) without concerns of what others think of them.

Communication (success, problems, strategies)

This is the other category that covers a largest number of incidents referring to occasions of successful interaction, or problems encountered in communication or strategies used in response.

Successful interactions. This is a rather small category that include cases of smooth intercultural interaction. Most of incidents have to do with conversational topics of mutual interest, for example, classes, movies and each other's culture, and for for female respondents particularly, cosmetics,

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boyfriends, marriage and family. Particular occasions may also give rise to smooth interaction, e.g., talks over a family meal, frequent contact with the same person, talks during an activity both participated in. Sometimes, just being together in a particular event. e.g., a rock concernt, makes interaction easier and smoother.

Problems. Most problems occurred in their intercultural communication with North Americans; a few also mentioned the ones they had with fellow Japanese, as well as with the administration. Eight sources are identified to give rise to problems in communication: English proficiency, cultural differences, topics, interaction partners, feedback, silence, inadequate communication strategies, pressure from ingroup.

"English proficiency" is not surprisingly most often the source of communication problems for this group of informants, which involves all aspects of the language and using. Specific examples include pronunciation, listening, speaking speed, limited vocabulary, literal understanding of expression, variations of English (children's talk, American dialets, clerk/receptionist routine response).

Communication problems stemming from "cultural differences" include jokes, ritualistic daily interactions, appropriate interaction for particular occasions, emphasis on talks in social interacton and difference in nonverbal cues. And there are reports of lack of communication on occasions. One (#18) explained it this way.

> "When we went to bowl, those who came to the room tried to communicate with us while others never did and just stayed with their boyfriends all the time. But more surprising was nobody cared to try to communicate with us. If the same thing happens in Japan, I think Japanese people would try to be polite to foreigners and talk to them. My friends and I felt they were distant. The same thing happened at dinner time. Friendly people responded to my questions, on the other hand, others reacted as if we were

invisible. They made me wonder if they hated Japanese."

Interestingly, several informants also mentioned problems related to exaggeration of cultural differences. One (#13) related this story.

"You know there is a girl ... she said her firnd would take us out to a movie at 7 o'clock on Friday night. She made the proposition three days before and mentioned it repeatedly even afterward. She sounded sincere, so we were waiting for her friend to come in the evening. (They asked me to wait for them I)n my room. But nobody show up even after 7pm. We went to the (her) room to remind her of the plan. Her friend was in her room talking to other people. But she said that they were kind of busy that evening, and suggested we go out the next evening. ... We decided to put it off to Sunday. But again, nobody come to take us out. ... I was upset, (but) I didn't do anything. I thought that is an American way. ... Although Japanese sometimes say things like 'let's get together soon' just to be sociable, I expected Americans were somehow different. But I was wrong. Americans are similar to Japanese in this respect."

Communication problems due to "conversation topics" include emotion expressions, politics, religions, things uniquely Japanese (e.g., minorities in Japan), or just lack of common interest in a topic.

"Interaction partners" giving rise to communication problems include hosts that had no interest in Japan, people met for the first time, some host students who were self-center and couldn't care less about others, old people, whom they found it hard to find a common topic to talk with.

"Feedbacks" or lack of them is another common source of problem. Informants reported that their inability to read the others reactions toward their input had made it very difficult for them to know how to continue a conversation.

"Silence" is a source of difficulty in two ways. Sometimes the partner dominated the conversation and talked so much that, informants reported, they

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became tired of being silent for so long and lost interest in the interaction. Alternatively, when the partner let them do the talking and kept quiet when they talked, which also made them nervous and could not continue.

"Communication strategies" sometimes also caused problems when they are inadequate. This is illustrated when an informant told about an occasion when she overdid it with compliments about pictures shown to her, so she was shown so many pictures that she had really no interest in.

Pressure from ingroup is a category that covers communication problems of a different kind, that with fellow Japanese students. Examples include expectations to conform by speaking Japanese to another Japanese, and the pressure to adjust to the group norms when interacting with another Japanese.

Strategies. This subcategory include comments and observations about what to do in intercultural communication to overcome the problems and difficulties. These strategies address several aspects of communication including topics, procedural tactics and general coping methods, which tend to be proactive.

With respect to "topics," it was often mentioned that good topics tended to make better communications. Strategies include to change a topic when interaction was not going anywhere, introduce specific topics (e.g., tell a joke, talk about daily happenings, talk about Japan, talk about what is in the news), and ask questions to let the other bring up interested topics.

"Procedural tactics" are the most numerous as to what to do to facilitate communication. Examples include to teach Japanese about the topic on hand, compare Japanese with English, use body language to help, ask for clarifications, write down what you said, rephrase frequently, put it in drawings to help express, consult dictionary frequently.

"General coping" methods include leave written messages, do some Japanese cultural thing to attract interest (e.g., cook Japanese food,

showing Japanese magazine), doing things together to built common ground (e.g., play piano, horseback riding), inform of one's plan ahead of time, show interests and ask many questions, and practice English whenever possible.

A separate subcategory is created to include strategies that are "passive" in nature. These strategies are make-shifts to cope with immediate problems. Examples include giving up without doing anything, pretending not to hear/asleep, keeping silence, or exploding in Japanese to vent frustration.

In contrast, a small subcategory can be separated that specifies strategies they observed in American hosts. Desirable ones include some "procedural" tactics: to ask for clarification patiently, listen attentively, use an English-Japanese dictionary to show the terms used, to correct pronunciation of commonly used terms, write or draw to help communication, constantly rephrase/repeat, and speak clearly. "General" coping methods include give compliments frequently, invite the other to joint any daily activities (e.g., grocery shopping, watching TV, going out), use positive nonverbals (e.g., smile, hug, pat on the shoulder), express desire/interest in the other's culture, do things to help the other feel at home (e.g., cook rice from time to time, share some family pictures and stories), offer to help. Lastly, many also mentioned a similar, undesirable strategy that is "passive" in nature, i.e., giving up quickly (e.g., saying never mind and not seek clarification, or simply letting problem pass and carrying on as much as possible),

Japaneseness

This category specifically includes behaviors in response to troublesome situations, which seem to reflect some unique Japanese characteristics. Examples include to blame self for the problem, be upset with self for every little mistake, constantly wonder if one has hurt the other's feelings,

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hesitate to ask for help or ask questions for fear of bothering others, become worried to have been rude to others, be concerned not to be impolite (e.g., by asking the other to repeat, by expression one's wishes, by asking to have a party), feel embarrass not to be understood in speaking, be conscious of sticking together with ingroups, and be careful of self-image in company of ingroups. As an example, an informant (#6) told us this story.

> "My roomate, John, ...is often out all night, and sometimes would come back at 5 am. Then I couldn't sleep well. I was short of sleep, but I knew the he was caring about me and I didn't say anything to him. ... his friends visited our room at midnight and chatted. It was so noisy that I could not sleep. John knew that, ... and he was telling his friends, 'be quiet.' And sometimes even got them out of the room. Another problem was the frequent calls at night. Usually there were calls by 3 am. At first I answered the phone and took a message for him, but I stopped doing that because I could not sleep. But ... I found out John had lived alone in this room before I came. Then I thought he was forced to change his life because of me and I sympathized with him. Sometimes, I would go to my friend's dormitory and slept there."

Discussion

Interview data for this study were collected in a semi-structured manner. The method has the advantage of producing information relevant to the research questions, and also of absorbing information not directly solicited which is rich in substance and details. We are relatively confident of the resulting data as being saturated with factual information, which is comprehensive and reflective of actual experience of our informants. At this stage, only a preliminary understanding can be reached without further inquiries. This section discusses findings in terms of further investigation into relationship of categories as perceived by the

participants. These relationships constitute part of development of a practical theory for Japanese-American intercultural training, which is the ultimate goal of the research project.

What we have learned so far is an overall assessment of the intercultural experience of Japanese visiting students. As reflected in the category of surprise, one of the two largest, theirs is an experience full of excitement at the surprising novelty of another culture (the US), which is not entirely unfamiliar due to the pervasive influence of mass media and of informal/indirect knowledge as a result of frequent contact between the two cultures--as referred to by cases in the category of preparedness. However, knowledge gained indirectly and knowledge gained through experience are qualitatively and phenomenologically different, hence the shock and surprise. They were surprises by the unfamiliar and the different, but also by some similarities they didn't expect between the two culture. On the other hand, the excitement is mingled with some negative surprises. These negative impressions reflect some fundamental differences in values and warrant special attention in further analyses of their influence on interaction and attitude formation. The real and imagine cultural difference and their influence on intercultural interaction is an aspect to be addressed in conceptualization of theory.

In terms of differences, previous cross-cultural communication studies have produced a good deal of useful knowledge through objective comparisons between the two cultures (e.g., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). The categories of surprises, difficulties/enjoyment in this study not only provide further support with participants own accounts as insiders of the event, but also highlight aspects of differencses particularly standing out to these people in their experience. It is one type of experience to be informed of and to talk about the individualistic tendency of the US culture and collectism of the Japanese, but quite a different experiene for a (Japanese) house guest to

feel being treated with an indifference from the (American) host, or to witness the (American) hosts so absolved in their private, intimate acts to be oblivious of the presence of (Japanese) house guests. Thus a bridge between cognitive experience and emotional experience is a specific areas in need of attnetion in theory development.

With regard to intercultural interaction, what impressed participants most is the communication problems they encountered, another of the largest category, and the anxiety as a consequence. It is worth noting that communication problems reported overwhelmingly outnumber reports of anxiety, Further examination will need to also pay attention to the relationship between these two variables, since anxiety is commonly regarded a major factor in intercultural interaction that is believed to associate with negative outcome as well as frequency of contact (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992).

Also interesting is the category of communication strategies participants employed to deal with problems at hand and in general. Their accounts has, from their own perspective, informed us the effectiveness of the strategies and even what may be used for what problem. Moreover, we also have a glimpse of their perception of what the other has done in intercultural interaction, and how that served the purpose. While this aspect awaits investigations from the North Americans' perspective for a better understanding of such intercultural communication, accounts here have given us access to Japanese experience and evaluation of the other's behavior. Communication strategy is undoubtedly an important variable for a theory of intercultural training. This category is valuable because it is generated from actual behaviors reported by intercultural communicators in actual situations, and not from imagined/projected interactions. These represent actual strategies in their repertoire that do not require extra-effort to acquire. The implication for training then may be the need to tap into this natural resource, instead of simply teaching new skills, since the

two require very different methods or approaches in training.

The category of personality represent participants' awareness of some stable characteristic affecting behaviors. While next step is to examine reported relationship between particular characteristics and communicative behaviors associated with it, either as its result or as a base for its inference. As they now stand, characteristics reported for Japanese and American appear to form a pattern of complementarity underlying the perception of a successful interaction as seen by the Japanese visiting students: the "ideal" is for Japanese to reach out and be assertive, and for Americans to take in and be receptive. In comparison, the category of Japaneseness and their generalization of American-ness subcategory (in surprise) also form a pattern of complementarity as a mirror-image: Americans are assertive and reaching out while Japanese are receptive and taking in. There seems to be a dialectic at work which is definitely in need of further exploration in the next stage. For now, it suffices to point out a possible connection between the above patterns and the dialectic of similarity-difference, and the idea of adaptation in interpersonal-intercultural interaction.

Lastly, it seems that the surprises have shocked the participants into a better awareness of their own cultural characteristics as well as their differences from the host culture. To what extent this new awareness impact on intercultural communication is a topic for future research.

In conclusion, preliminary analyses in this study have produced interesting descriptive categories representing important variables in interpersonal-intercultural interaction, and have opened the the path to development of a well-grounded theory of Japanese-American Intercultural communication in face-to-face situations. Some possible shapes and forms of the theory are outlined above awaiting for exploration and conceptualization. Further development will be undertaken soon and will take into consideration

practical implications of the theory to be developed.

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